

THE COOPER UNION ALUMNI & PIONEER

The Elephant in the Room

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Abstract

The commencement speaker, the Chair of the Board, and the President acknowledged the elephant in the room: the graduation of the first “paying” class. The words are inspiring and a must-read for all members of the Cooper Community who did not witness the ceremony. Transcribed from the YouTube video at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyoHhM1WsLk>>

Graduate Tobias Stein: I am incredibly honored to be here right now. One, for speaking from this lecturn in such a historic hall; two, for the opportunity to speak on behalf of this graduating class; and most importantly, for being a part of the graduating Class of 2018.

Soon, we will walk across this stage to receive diplomas which read our names but before we do so I think we need to recognize that these diplomas are not just ours. They belong to our parents, to our siblings, our friends, our classmates, our professors, our shop techs, our lab techs, our buildings and grounds staff, our librarians, our archivists, our tutors, our advisors, our administrators, our adjuncts, our Writing Center, our security guards, and they belong to this institution, for they belong to everyone and everything that has molded us into the people who will walk across the stage today.

So while we now celebrate the fantastic group of people who are probably itching to get out of these weird black gowns and dealing with the tassels in the caps, I think we all do need to recognize all of those other people who got us here. It was those people who ensured, allowed, and encouraged the Class of 2018 to be the Class of 2018.

So now, typically, a commencement speech is one that yields advice. The word “commencement” at its core means “beginning.” Historically speaking, this ceremony marked the transition. You used to go to university to gain enough useful knowledge to then profess at that institution and this exact ceremony was that transition, the ending of your career as a student and the commencement of your career as an academic. It would be somewhat strange, though, if I came up here and gave you all a bunch of advice, as I haven’t lived the rest of my life, so why would you listen to me? So with that in mind, while I now try to avoid the classic pomp of a commencement speech, where I tell you to call your parents, floss, or break the rules, I in turn want to share and reflect upon what our time at this Union means to us and how it defines us.

I say “Union” for this is not just a university, for this is not just a college. For one, it’s the marriage of our disciplines of science and art, the unique crossroad between emotion and reason. I cannot say I know the sense of rigor in either of the other two schools as well as that I know of my own experience, but I feel as though you all know this already. We’ve all lived that since day one, and for everyone else in the room, I imagine you saw it as well: late night calls about what this was all for, and the tired eyes you saw plastered on our faces when we came home after finals week. In all of us, this union between student and institution has shaped us into the people we are today, and I, too, would argue that we have had the utmost pleasure of shaping this institution into what it is today as well.

For our artists and engineers who graduate today, we are a pretty unique class. I'd even go as far as to say the first of our kind. We all received our yeses just as excited as every class before us was, yet ours were slightly different. Mine, for one, sat in my spam folder for about a month and a half as the Gmail junk filter saw the word "Lipton" and thought, "Ooh, iced tea" and not "Ooh, college." We then arrived at this institution as THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM. No longer was tuition a concept, it was our reality, and I'd be lying if I didn't say that it showed we were the bulge class, the less-qualified class, the paying class. We were oriented at a campground with Jamshed and his dogs and disoriented in the city with zines and leaflets packed with institutional history. We were taught in classrooms by professors trying to start a new major from underneath us. We watched as administrators fled, left, right, and center. At times it was hard to distinguish between reindeer and departing admin: "On Dasher, gone Dahlberg, gone Jamshed, gone Liebeskind, gone Epstein, gone Buckler, gone Catherine Hill Blitzen." I remember so clearly having a conversation with my dad about today, about whether after four years there would be an institution for me to graduate from when today came, and yet here we are and yet here stands our institution.

Our time here has never been boring. We've had truly a countless number of Deans, administrators, staff, and professors depart during our tenure. I quite literally tried to count and I stopped after hitting 25. We've weathered the storm of computer science and a president who'd given up on our institution. We upheld the social contract and levitated our Great Hall. We were dishonest together as we guessed in this very room on the perfect test, designed to prove one's knowledge: 12 multiple choice questions. We wolfed down Frankie spicy chicken sandwiches, ate countless salmon teriyakis, and learned that sinus always does get the minus. We have read New York Times articles highlighting the infighting within our administrators. We watched the great ascent and descent of some of our institution's biggest names. We've enjoyed the fantastic additions of professors across all departments. We were fortunate enough to have been led forward by the calm steadying hand of Bill Mea. We yelled "No!" when a credit limit was imposed and we yelled "Yes!" when Laura was hired. We have used these hallowed halls to debate, to protest, and to learn.

We graduate today with our fifth year architects, the final class not to pay tuition, and we watch as all those at our institution pay for access to something that should be free.

We've had Menschel fellows hold exhibitions that have taught us about humanity and we've attended conferences that have excited us about the potential of our future. We grew closer together as we navigated how to honor the lives of a fellow student, Mischa Candice, a truly beloved professor, Diane Lewis, and one of the people who saved this school, in Adrian Jovanovich.

The simple fact is that our experience here was never just about our study. Our time here is as unique as every single one of us is. The changes we made, the ideas we thought, the pieces we brought to life, the critiques we endured, the equations we proved, the hundreds of thousands of questions we asked, they are now sewn into the very fabric of this Union and hopefully that is also what we leave with. I'm very much of the opinion that Cooper has incredibly exciting times ahead and I know that it would not be on its current course, were it not for the unrelenting work over the course of the past couple of years. I do not think that any of us know when exactly this day will be, but someday soon we will read a very different headline in the New York Times to that which we are used to. That headline will read the following "Storied New York Institution Officially Returns to Free."

I don't know what we all will be doing in the world, I don't know what we'll be doing with our lives, but I know that we'll be beaming, Peter Cooper among us. You see, Cooper is not defined by its buildings nor by its walls, it's defined by its people. There's a reason we're not sitting on a quad that we once threw a Frisbee on, there's a reason we're not wearing purple sitting in Yankee Stadium and listening to a parade of 20,000 names that mean nothing to us. Rather we are celebrating a very small group of people who mean everything to us. Today I want us to leave knowing the immense power and privilege we possess by being graduates of THE Cooper Union. We join an incredibly small pool of people lucky enough to have weathered everything they

could have thrown at us, and we gain something that no one can ever take away: the right to call ourselves Cooper Union alumni.

We came here wide-eyed, brilliant, and curious, but we leave far better than before, knowing what questions we can now answer but, far more importantly, what questions we need now ask. If nothing else, I implore you, use those questions to challenge others and to challenge yourself.

Thank you, Peter Cooper.

Board Chair Rachel Warren: On behalf of the Board of Trustees, many of whom are here today, many of whom, like you, were students at this fine institution, we offer our congratulations.

But more important, we offer a hearty thank you to the Class of 2018. You are a very special class. Four years ago our community was in disarray. You had choices. You had many choices, but you chose to apply and to attend Cooper Union. You chose to continue a hundred and fifty plus year tradition of excellence and you inspired all of us, all of us, together - students, faculty, administration, staff, trustees, alumni - to find a path back to our heritage of full-tuition scholarships. We thank you.

We thank you for showing confidence and trust in our leadership and we thank you for your contributions as students, which you [have] demonstrated by your dedication and commitment to your studies, and we thank you for the contributions that you will make every day as graduates through your professional and personal accomplishments which we know will be equally impressive.

We, the trustees, are here to support the institution which is so many things: its history, the building, the speeches made in this very hall, all the amazing things made and done by amazing people who have gone here and taught here. But most of all, at any given moment, this institution is nothing more and nothing less than the students who do the hard work necessary to make it, not just in the door, but all the way to graduation. If we are here to do anything, it is to see you all the way through your journey. You are why we are here and we could not be happier or more proud as we share this day with you, your families, your loved ones, and your friends. Thank you to the Class of 2018.

President Laura Sparks: Welcome to our Great Hall. It is indeed Commencement Day and whether this is your first time in the Great Hall or one of many visits, there is no time here quite as special as Commencement. Speaking on behalf of all who are on this stage today, we are so very honored and so very pleased to be celebrating this moment with you. To the Class of 2018, you hold a very special place in my heart. You are the first graduating class with whom I've spent a full academic year and I will never forget it. I have watched your projects evolve, I've questioned you about the posters you've hung, stood with anticipation as your critiques unfolded, and absorbed your thesis presentations. I have watched you prepare for this moment and I will never forget the way you have impacted my outlook. You amaze me.

To the family and friends of our graduates, thank you. This is your celebration, too. You have supported our graduates through their time here, through ups and downs, through many twists and turns, at the times when they needed you most. This is a celebration for you, too, and to those who couldn't be here because the distance was too far, the cost too great, a life not long enough to see this day, know that you are with us, too.

This day, this ceremony, is remarkable for so many reasons. First and foremost, Commencement Day means you've done it. Just a few years ago, you arrived here as some of the most impressive college applicants in the world, and since then you've done more and been challenged in more ways that I'm guessing you could ever have imagined. You've solved problems and calculations that were far beyond you when you walked through the doors of the Cooper Union. You designed bridges to withstand hurricanes and cars that win national competitions. You mounted art exhibitions with a multitude of scales, perspectives, and materials, and just as

importantly, you help your colleagues mount theirs. You model buildings in incredible detail that someday might just inspire new paradigms for homes, for industry, for culture, for education, for the society that you imagine. You did this while this institution and the society in which it sits were in a state of drastic transition and you lived, independently, in one of the greatest and most important cities in the world.

Through all of this and all of the countless hours in your labs, classrooms, gallery space and favorite study spots, you have been shaping the kind of influence you hope to have, the kind of impact you hope to make on your community, our city, our nation and the world at large. Today is the day, the moment, when all of that hard work and perseverance, your creativity and innovation, your late nights, your early mornings, and that space that seems to not exist in between those two, are commended, and deservedly so.

Commencement day in this Great Hall on this stage is remarkable for what it represents for the Cooper community. You continue a long lineage of inquisitive, engaged, passionate leaders setting out to not only contribute to the world of art, architecture, and engineering, but also to leverage that knowledge across many industries and professions and across the many issues that are most pressing in cultivating a healthy society. I was outside this morning asking a few of you if you were/felt ready, and some of you said you weren't sure. Well, I know that you're ready and you know it, too.

[Deleted for length: Acknowledgements of faculty, staff, families, and alumni.]

About midway through your time here, you saw the beginning of a healing process. People began to work together toward a new future. There's still plenty of work ahead of us and while the past can't be undone, I share this perspective to remind you of how far our community has come during your time here and how you and your Cooper family, despite a very challenging period, have moved forward together to arrive at what in many ways feels like a brand new day. The transformation of an institution like ours mirrors in some ways your own. The professionals and leaders you are becoming will grow from your experiences, your challenges, your successes, and your failures. The key is being open to all of it, to the experimentation and discovery, to divergent points of view, to knowing when to lead, when to listen, and sometimes even when to follow, all in the name of creating common good, shared purpose, and progress.

Shortly you will walk across the storied stage of the Great Hall. You will walk the path that generations of Cooper graduates have travelled before you. You will also walk in the footsteps of American presidents, from Abraham Lincoln to Barack Obama, social reformists and activists like Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Congressman John Lewis, as well as scores of everyday men and women who have gathered here to advance positive social change. All have come to the Great Hall to make their voices heard, just as our founder Peter Cooper intended it. He imagined the Cooper Union to be the hub of civic discourse, a platform for social change. In this Great Hall he created a destination for people to gather, to organize, to push our country's thinking forward to create a more inclusive society. We are all stewards of Peter Cooper's vision, and I challenge you to take that legacy with you wherever go and advocate for a better world around you. We are in the midst of extraordinary times. There is so much that is broken, and the deeply charged rhetoric that surrounds us makes it too easy to quickly judge something as right or wrong, as true or false. I challenge you to avoid that trap. Lead by example, make room to understand another point of view, debate different principled perspectives, use fact and evidence and compassion to arrive at a deeper understanding of an issue and of each other. Whether an architect, artist, or engineer or something entirely different informed by your experiences here, approaching things with an eye toward inclusion will make your work stronger, more interesting, more engaging to the world around you. It will make your world, our society, stronger and more resilient.

Speaking of your world, much has happened during your time here at the Cooper Union. Civil rights, gay rights, immigration rights, all made headlines, and many of you bravely added your voices to those conversations. Gun violence continued, hurricanes ravaged, monuments came down, a presidential election

season divided our nation, and in doing so reinforced the importance of democracy, the principles that underpin it, and the values of inclusion that so many of us hold dear. #MeToo, #TimesUp, #SilenceBreakers, all were part of a sea change in how women and men are responding personally and professionally to discrimination and unacceptable behavior.

Art exhibitions in New York examined these topics and so many more: the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., white nationalism, white collar and blue collar work, censorship, women and politics, the challenging of nations, cultures, and religions; the list is long and important and I hope that much of it has served as an extension of your Cooper Union experience.

Architects are addressing similar issues: with breathtaking aesthetics and smart design come functionality that influences how we work, how we play, how we reflect and admire, how we live, how we solve problems. I recently read an article that said, “When a building is both beautiful and good in equal measure, it is held up as a pinnacle of architectural mastery.” So, from temporary housing and the plight of refugees to smart, more affordable, more livable cities; again, the list goes on, and architects are defining how we engage with each other in a collective society.

On the engineering and technology front, 3D printing arrived as a real option for many industries, moving from plastic to metal fabrication, a potential game-changer for mass production. Artificial intelligence began to make its mark, blurring lines with engineering, philosophical, mathematical, and artistic implications. The transformation of natural gas into clean energy is no longer a pipe dream but is being piloted in Houston in the heart of petroleum country.

The point is that New York, the country, the world look different just a few years after you walked through our doors, and in many ways the world has come to you here at Cooper. Great thinkers, makers, and doers have been on this stage to inspire your great thinking, making, and doing. In just the last several months, contemporary artist and activist Ai Weiwei connected art with social commentary on the global immigration crisis. Detroit’s Director of Planning and Development and a 1983 architecture alumnus, Maurice Cox, talked about urban regeneration and the turnaround of a city. Dr. Atul Gawande spoke of the thorny intersection of science and humanity.

All the while, you’ve been listening, you’ve been learning, and now it’s your turn to go out into the world, to make your mark, and to ask the important questions about who we are as a society and devise some new solutions. We need them. And you’re ready. I have seen you debate each other in important, nuanced, and respectful ways. We have talked together about the ways in which you are already navigating these critical paths. It won’t be easy, but you are ready.

So go forth, Class of 2018. This is your time, your turn. I fully expect that you will have something to do with how our world looks and feels in the years to come and I cannot wait to see what you have in store for us. Congratulations, and thank you for all that you have done to help shape the Cooper Union.

The current version of this document can be found at <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/elephant.pdf>>. Corrections to this document are appreciated and will be implemented by the author. The original version was completed on October 19, 2018.

The Alumni Pioneer, <<http://www.notnicemusic.com/Cassandra/cooper.html>>, was a virtual newspaper with breaking news stories and links to analyses, sources and the media. It was written and formatted in an inverted-pyramid newspaper style to facilitate quick access to what is deemed the most important information. It is now a news archive.